

9 Pyramid of Sergeants

In a darkening bronze, three men sit at a white table. Above, a pale umbrella floats. In the middle of the table... what looks to be an antique-gold pyramid. The three, outlined in grains of trembling light, laugh in a jazzy, syncopated way.

What happens to laughter at such a time when purples insinuate sooty golds in the sky? And luminous deer watch from the mouth of black woods?

"Yeah. Right. Korea. Land of the Morning Calm. And afternoon. Evening too, yeah, at least after the war when all you could do is sit around and fart for entertainment. Not like my first tour there when we got our assholes reamed from the Yalu River to sweet-smelling Pusan. But I was infantry then, gentlemen, a soldier! Not yet among you 4-F commandos of the Ordinance Corps, fucking up all manner of weapons and jeeps and tanks.

"That happened in Vietnam, where they sent a killer to repair binoculars? What a waste!" The speaker adds another to the

flickering pyramid of beercans in the center of the white table.

"Well, hell now! You two old sergeants liked the shit smell of Pusan. Reminded you of your redneck outhouses."

The two other men chuckle, and offer wavering toasts in the deepening twilight, such gestures telling him to go on.

"They use human shit for fertilizer there, as you two grizzlies know! Got stuck out one night on maneuvers, carved out a squash and slept in it!

"But that never happened, of course. All you have to know in this world is what didn't happen. And old sergeants know things that never happened better than anybody. Anyway, what did happen, believe it or not, is that the war ended just about when I eased into my second tour there. That's why they sent me: End the war! Yes Sir! Right away Sir!

"Taking on too much authority? You got wit deficit there, Sergeant? Just the opposite I know--perpetually breaking my balls! Anyway, what I do know is that you and me and all the other sergeants run the fuckin army, which is conveniently forgotten in peacetime. Hell in wartime too! Oh what am I talking about? Preaching to the choir! Christ Almighty, worse than a crying drunk or something. Leave me fish another brew out here."

He pushes aside a hunk of black, bobbing ice to get a dripping can. Pops the tab, and the tiny spray picks up flecks of purple light.

"You know something?--besides this being a mighty small pyramid of empties for a trio of professional drunks like us? We have served well, but never learned to ask the basic questions. Now what do you think of that shit? My kids said I could never ask the basic questions, most lately about Vietnam, naturally.

"Nam! The most fucked up war ever! Besides ruining the country and all that shit, it ruined my life too. Busted up my marriage, lost me a son up in Canada.

"Yeah, well the pain of Mickey being a draft dodger was nothing. He drowned up there, and that tore the fuckin heart right outa me!" Browsing deer look up for an instant. "It just tore...

"Well, that's a very lovely thing to say. I appreciate that. Nobody on the outside could ever imagine the hearts of pure gold in this man's army! Too busy clawing at each other. Besides making fun of us as so many rubes!

"But can you imagine? Fuckin Canada? You don't have to tell me about family. You don't have to tell me about country. My other son, he went to Nam and now he hates me for it, like I engineered the war or something. Ain't that some kind of insane hippie shit?

"They spit on him when he got back. In San Francisco airport they spit on him. I don't know if I believe him. That was a story before he came back. Some kids adopt a story 'cause they like hearing it. So they plunk themselves in the middle! But if it's true, if it really happened, then welcome to the world of soldiering!

"My country right or wrong and who gives a shit? Anyway, I don't believe anybody spit on him. A myth he liked putting himself into, as I say.

"Truth the first casualty in war, you say, handsome Sarge?— and that ain't tough, the other two of us being so ugly.

"Everywhere I'd say. And who gives a shit? I didn't answer that previously, did I? A real question, not what the officers call rhetorical. Well the answer is we do. The Sergeants. The engine! And all that crap pouring out of the TV about Vietnam!

And never the soldiers' side, the troopers'! The kid soldier maybe, crybaby, but never the old trooper's side! He takes what's given. Drop him down anywhere in the world and he gets it fuckin done!

It's only politics takes time. Fuckin Vietnam! What happened to us? The professionals lost! Our trade and we lost at it, finally. Won all the battles and lost the war. Figure out that fuckin one! Anyway, Heartbreak City!

“Yeah yeah yeah, so you and me and all you sergeants know it already, but we gotta be reminded. Maybe that last reminder’ll pull the barrel out of your mouth, right? Or put it back in there. Take your choice. Fuck it! Open up your eyes and look at those deer out there. Ever see anything that fuckin beautiful? It’s like they sucked the light into their coats. Look at that one, his skin jumping like lightning or something.

“Well, here’s to great company and this beautiful place. Right at this very minute the best spot on earth. Yeah...there was a lot wrong in Nam, and not just ‘cause the politicians were always dragging your balls down. There was the leadership there. Piss-poor Officers. I come close to fragging one little sucker, I’ll tell you. Whoops, getting my wars mixed up: That was Korea. But I know about a lot of fraggings in Nam. Officers killed by friendly fire, Uh huh. Temporary cures. Hey, tell the truth to each other but don’t foul the nest.

“So the politicians dance, and the people eventually just give up. But the sergeant butts dumbly on!

“Think about that...” falls his voice, falls and the black woods themselves seem to moan, deer in pale outline.

“I knew it all once. Hey, when you’re young and full of hot shit ready to explode, you know it all. Like this young lieutenant in Korea. Skipper. He got on my case a lot of times back then.

Twenty years ago? And for what? Not asking the basic questions, or however it was expressed back then by the college boys. Like suits change their fuckin styles, you know? I don't know. Something I was doing wrong, or thinking wrong, that all the young pissers knew, was born knowing. Oh yeah!

"Hey! Can't even see you boozers now. Well...just. Now what the hell's approaching? That come up out of Chesapeake Bay or something? Halt! Who fuckin goes there?"

Two barely-discernable figures with silvery sticks come towards them.

"Didn't know this here was the post golf course. I just come over here to the snack bar 'cause they had the enlisted men's club closed for renovations. Expanding it for the next war. Pardon me while I sing. Ohhhhhh, what makes the grass grow so green in Aberdeen? Why, chickenshit!"

Lightest breathing is heard one ball clinks into a cup...then another.

"They're playing by Braille, if you ask me. I did that plenty but not on no golf course. Okay okay okay, I'll get back to the squirt lieutenant, but you're gonna wish I didn't 'cause you're gonna find out something you don't really wanna know. You guys are hard, grizzlies, but nobody's hard enough. So it was Skipper

in Korea. Ain't that some name for a man? But what the fuck, it was the new army back then. Ain't it always? Always new everything everywhere. Can't keep fuckin up with it except it's always S.O.S. Same ole shit.

"Yeah, our most sober sergeant, I agree with you: new and old at the same time! Now how could that be? Our rigid military minds couldn't hold such a concept! Impossible!

"Anyway when you're young, you're fuckin unique and that's all there is to it. You think you're some kind of indestructible angel whose lies, even, are holy! Screw a snake and say it was for science. And ain't it a wonder the lady's crotches don't melt right out of their panties with you a hundred yards away?

"Anyway, managed to find twenty gallons of alcohol that crazy-ass day. Then five pairs of Binoculars got us a couple of cases of oranges from a navy ship at Pusan. Hey! Since we took our chances on the plague, let the swabies flirt around with scurvy. Hemorrhagic fever they called it in Korea, from the fleas of rats. I guess we all remember plopping down into stinking foxholes in the middle of drowned and poisoned rats. Just so some guy'd feel safe in his Cadillac, and a mortar won't be lobbed between him and his Honey in bed at the Bluebird Motel.

"Hey! Good luck to him! We protect everybody. Just ain't sensitive is all. So, Old Sergeants! Then, some not so old

sergeants celebrated the end of the Korean War with a fuck it and forget it mule-kick potion called Screwdrivers in a fifty five gallon drum with its top cut off. Everything in excess!

“Why hell, if we could drop this bunch of grizzlies back there now, we wouldn't miss a beat. Most of my life seems to consist of going back and doing things I did before, walking up to somebody you haven't seen in twenty years, and saying something like hey, you was telling me how the old lady fucked you up good. She complete the job yet?

“But screw all that 'cause we was dipping in there with those huge aluminum mess cups, big blue ice bobbing around! In all that dusky orange! That smell like gasoline and vodka and acid orange like to burn out hairs in your nostrils! And just like this ice beside me melting down here in Aberdeen, Maryland.

And twenty years or so between two pretty blue hunks of ice and...the same hunk. The same hunk. No years. All of life is fuckin deja vu, soldier's life a any rate. Well anyway, all you heard back then were sipping noises and sighs, and we wanted to go on that way forever in that dark green air of that buttoned-up tent where you had to drink 'cause you couldn't breathe. Once in a while you'd hear a dogface yell, but from further away than those deer there. They're playing basketball back then while us sergeants drink ourselves senseless for our country.

"And all the while there were some smart guys somewhere just firing those basic questions all over the lot. Hundred a minute. Unless you're a soldier and it's fuck the basic questions or whatever you wanna call them 'cause if you're a soldier, you got the only security: Follow the orders and forget the shit, and the shitters, behind them.

"All the diarrhea of the mouth in this country!

"And if the orders make even less sense than usual, well then we know just how to do nothing, or how to Stepinfetchit till the officers get the right ideas. That's a sample of our art, and it ain't in any book or on TV neither. You feel your way through his fuckin life. That's the art of it, all right.

"And yet with my wife and boys...?

"Ain't it though? A real complicated life. I agree: C is a good grade in life and love, but I want A in everything and that's why my guts grind, I suppose. Well anyway this fuckbrain lieutenant, this Skipper, he really got to me the day the Korean War ended. Twenty seven July, nineteen and fifty three if I ain't mistaken, gentlemen.

"As I said, I was kinda inside a big booze bore like this, no offense. Anyway, we're not built to watch fairy captains putt in their pretty little Bermuda shorts. But, hell, let anybody shoot for any hole they want, right?"

The golfers leave in their car, headlights sweeping pockets of mist. In one a buck nibble leaves, lifting his head at the droning of the car.

“Anyway, they had stopped playing games with the peace terms at Panmunjohn, and we got out of that war. In anticipation of which, I had been working on a chrome-plated forty-five to trade to the division supply sergeant for alcohol. Legal as you old ordinance types know for cleaning lenses. I wrapped the requisition around the pretty gun, and would you believe he found some when none was in stock?

Repeating about the alcohol? Well, it hadda come from somewhere! I’m just trying to get everything straight for you two. The facts!”

“Then someone pushes a flap aside and you could see these kids playing basketball against the absolute fuckin gold of the rice paddies. Knock your eye out, and those screwdrivers sliding down! You bank those moments and draw on them for a lifetime. And I don’t mean just the drinking, but what everything looks like and the stories of everybody...yeah I can listen too! I can!

“But back then, the quiet settles in and it all gets all ...stretchy...I don’t know, the time I mean. I don’t know how to say it, but it’s living at any rate.

“So in all that lovely green and orange and blue funk, in bursts this squirt shavetail of a lieutenant, and in the middle of my sigh, the longest fuckin one ever exhaled by man! This damn lieutenant Skipper! Get the troops to the messhall, compulsory lecture!”

“The war’s over and he’s by the book! A historic first for him! He’s gonna read the sermon to the company that the Pentagon sends down in a kit, and with all the answers answered for you if anybody’s stupid enough to ask. You know, how we hadda stop Chinese Charlie in Chunchon or he’d rape every woman and half the men in the shopping plazas around Atlanta. Well you know the shit that they said, and in Nam too, though they was called on it there.”

“As we know, Gentlemen, the reason for war is war. War is the reason!” Deer approach closer, their coats twitching in black silver. “But it didn’t do no good to tell him Hey, Lieutenant! War’s over.

“There was a conversation then. All bets off, with both of us shouting, but there was no deer to run away, just sweating GIs and ossified sergeants. And I was telling him what you never should say, that the dogfaces don’t give a shit about the fuckin propaganda. They’d just as soon listen to the other side’s.

"I lost the debate and soon we were all sitting in the messhall, all arms and legs and stinking breath and soaking fatigues. Armpits and assholes! But he went on and on with the stupid lecture, this Skipper, till I couldn't stand it anymore.

'Hey Lieutenant! These poor dogfaces don't care about Communism. And the gooks don't know what it is neither when their asshole officers explain it to them. And they was fighting for it.

'We're dogfaces is all, and all we know is we haven't been killed. So why not we all have a fuckin drink for Jesus Christ's sake? And you come back to the sergeant's tent...'?"

"Communists! Nazis! Shit! How many times have I listened to the asshole wisdom of officers and smiled my sergeant's smile like it was nailed to my fuckin face? But the other guy is bad! Bad! No fuckin doubt.

When I was really young, I transported a German prisoner and we got lost for a week crawling through bombed-out cities looking for women and booze.

I'm Godfather to his youngest, a girl with her own girl now. Of course! He was a sergeant! An international nation of sergeants!"

He assumes another voice as the other two shift in their squeaky metal chairs. "Then this Skipper says 'Your opinions are

interesting, Sergeant. We will go into them and any other questions in the context of the question and answer period.'

He had started with a shriek and ended in a fuckin wandering whisper, and right then I knew I did a bad fuckin thing 'cause the sonabitch was cracking and he was just trying to give some discipline to himself, really, to the troopers too, but mostly to hold himself together. Hey we were all crazy there. He just took it up a notch. His eyes...just terrified. All you could see was whites. He even woke the troops up, so fuckin crazy his act.

"Next, he's out of there with me chasing. I had my own kids! I'm trying to make it right, somehow, 'cause my pride's in killing people, not hurting them. That sounds weird to anybody else but I can say it to you guys. One of the things I gotta say. And you two know now what I knew back then: our pride's to turn ourselves inside out to make things right, and if I had any idea he was so shaky, I'd shut up while he spouted his stupid lecture for hours!

"It's one of the things burnt the shit out of my life!

"Are there others? I wondered when you two'd really start breaking it off! Anyway, I had dismissed the dogfaces before I started to run after the crazy lieutenant, and I could hear their buzzing in back of me, his leading me into a little canyon off the side of our company area. And right then it was more trouble!

'Cause I had dumped out a lot of surplus shit there I didn't feel like inventorying--little replacement lenses and shit like that.

"And now these blue lenses begin the part you won't believe. Glowing! Under bushes and weeds, glowing, burning! Skipper screaming to high heaven about nothing, but all the starch just goes out of my legs and I just fuckin sink down, nothing to breathe, air sucked out like before a thunderstorm or something! But real fire-like, with this lousy chemical taste.

"Son! I croak, and he turns around with those fuckin white eyes, and all of a sudden, FUFFFFF! He's blotches of fire, a string! He drops like a rock and these white blotches skitter off him and roll around the whole fuckin place, making those lenses melt like blue rushing water, little whitecaps from the aluminum casings! And fuckin smoke smoke! coming up from young Skipper!

"I scream the fuckin loudest I can scream and these medics are rushing by me and where the fuck did they come from?

And then this one-star slitty-eye general plants himself in front of me. I'm still screaming, and can't stop, and it sounds like somebody else is, not me. Screaming I mean. And shapes come and go in that black smoke.

'The lieutenant will be all right. Fine. No Sweat. And ... nothing happened, you got that? You've been around long enough to know what I mean. Everything'll be fine.'

"All I knew is they had fucked up their little chemical exercise, and that they thought they were miles from any GIs with their fuckin shooting-around white fire! It was horrible!

"Hey! But thank God it never happened. Like a lot of things that happened and it's nice to know they didn't, right? That's what they call History.

"And Skipper, kid lieutenant, doesn't check into a veterans' hospital every month or so for tests. And I don't get a couple of raging strep throats a year, real fierce bastards because they're caused by something never happened.

"Didn't some Hitler doctor pour concrete into cunts? Education! It'll save the world. And ain't it a strange love?

"But Gentlemen! After all is said and done, we are soldiers! Oh there's bitching, but absolutely no one can ever understand the pride! Only us!

"A soldier will not allow his duty to be troubled, but when he lay him down to sleep, God puts a fuckin ton of bricks on his chest!"

The three men will sleep, their heads on the table; the deer having spirited away.

"Skipper!" Sarge will spout in dreams, the other two mumbling. And then, "Oh my little Mickey. Let me go down in the water with you."

